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AIR WAR COLLEGE

RESEARCH REPORT

EDUCATING OUR FIGHTER SQUADRON COMMANDERS
TO FACE DEATH IN THEIR SQUADRONS

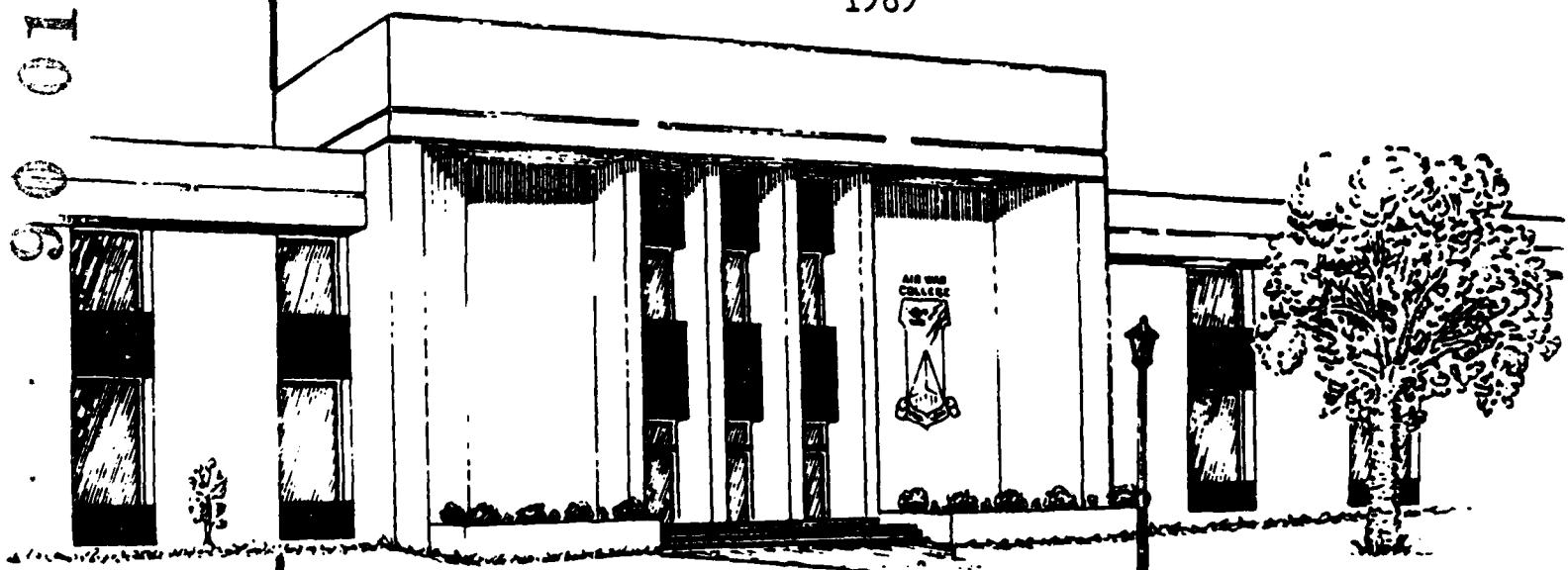
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UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

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REPLY TO
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16 Aug 89

SUBJECT Security & Policy Review (AU/PA 89-161)

TO AWC/DFC (Dr Bogard)

The attached student research report titled: 'Educating Our Fighter Squadron Commanders to Face Death in Their Squadrons,' by Lt Col Coy D. Fink, is approved for release in accordance with AFR 190-1.

Alan J. Rod

ALAN J. ROD
Chief
Security & Policy Review

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AIR WAR COLLEGE
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EDUCATING OUR FIGHTER SQUADRON COMMANDERS
TO FACE DEATH IN THEIR SQUADRONS

by

Coy D. Fink
Lt. Colonel, USAF

A DEFENSE ANALYTICAL STUDY SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN
FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM
REQUIREMENT

Advisor: Colonel James E. Salminen

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

March 1989

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TITLE: Educating our Fighter Squadron Commanders to Face Death in their Squadrons

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>The case is presented that fighter squadron commanders frequently experience death in their squadrons with little experience or guidance concerning how to face the situation. A plan to educate the commander is outlined that includes familiarization with classical, psychological responses to death and also learning of the responsibilities expected of the commander. The emphasis is on education to remove the unknowns. Techniques are discussed on how to share this information with squadron members to keep the effort focused and ultimately use the experience to build a stronger organization. The commander must lead. (S. 1)

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Coy D. Fink has spent most of his Air Force career in fighter related activities, including flying assignments in PACAF, USAFE, and the Tactical Air Command. He has served as operations officer and commander of fighter squadrons and as Director of Operations and Vice Commander of Red Flag. He has civilian degrees in Chemical Engineering and Human Resource Management and is a resident graduate of the Naval Command and Staff College. Colonel Fink is a student at the Air War College, class of 1989.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One of every two of you that become commanders of fighter squadrons will experience a major aircraft accident in your squadron during your two-year tour of command. (16:--) The majority of these accidents will result in the death of one or more of your squadron members. (16:--) Leading your squadron through this period may be the most demanding and most important challenge you will face in your career, yet there is very little formal guidance or advice on how to face this challenge.

Education is the key to successful leadership; education that replaces unknowns with knowns. Perry Smith described a major aspect of crisis leadership as keeping things simple by asking your people to do only those things they are trained to do, and not asking them to do new things with which they are unfamiliar. (14:55) Knowing what to expect relieves apprehension and sets the stage to better face any crisis. Death is no exception.

Your first educational step is to learn the classical, psychological reactions to sudden and unexpected death. Having even a layman's understanding of the stages of shock, denial, anger, guilt, depression and acceptance will provide insight to understand otherwise unknown reactions. Your knowledge of these classical reactions, combined with knowledge of your people, can provide a sound background for facing this most difficult situation.

Your second educational step is to become familiar with your responsibilities. Know exactly what is required by regulations and procedures so that you can prepare and plan. This preparation will aid tremendously in performing such tasks as notifying the next of kin, coordinating with personal affairs, mortuary affairs, and the chaplain, and selecting people to serve as Summary Court and Escort Officers. There is no substitute for knowing both what to expect and what is expected.

Once you complete this educational process, you should share pertinent information with squadron members. This before-the-fact information will help your people ward off fear and doubt. Armed with knowledge of what to expect and what is expected, you can better plan for and lead your squadron through the challenge of facing death. Acceptance will be easier and the squadron will evolve stronger from the experience.

CHAPTER II

HUMAN REACTIONS WHEN FACING DEATH

Education is a key factor in anything we do. If we know what to expect, acceptance will come much easier. Facing death is no exception. Psychologist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has done extensive work to help the layman understand what to expect and accept when facing death. (7:-, 8:-, 9:-, 10:-) Her insights into the classical stages of denial, anger, guilt, depression and acceptance in the grieving process provide information to make a most difficult situation easier.

Shock

Adjusting to the death of a fellow aviator is always painful. The process is especially difficult when the loss occurs suddenly and without warning, as in an aircraft accident. The common response to sudden and unexpected loss is shock or psychic numbing, a natural process that both protects us from the overwhelming effect of loss and enables us to experience intolerable events in small steps. It is nature's way of insulating and cushioning the blow. (5:4)

Shock is usually physical. It is common to experience odd physical sensations such as a spaced-out feeling, a knot in the stomach, and no appetite. (5:4) Difficulties of concentration and sudden lapses in continuity of thoughts are common, as well as feelings of emptiness and associated frequent sighing. Preoccupation with thoughts of the accident and of the lost aviator are

classical.

The results of shock or numbing may be quite varied and can continue for weeks or months after an unexpected loss. But the shock, the numbness, will not prevent a person from doing what must be done. Mothers who must cope with the needs of a young child will manage somehow to meet those needs. Whatever the situation, the bereaved will retain the capacity to be rational. The numbness will soon wear away, and real grieving will begin.

(5:4)

Denial

Shock is the first reaction to death. When the numbness begins to disappear, the usual response is "no--it cannot be true," a response that begins the denial phase of grieving. Denial is usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance. (7:40) In denial you comprehend intellectually what has happened, but on a deeper level, all your habits and memories deny death.

Denial is a failure to accept, and the depth of denial depends on how much you need the deceased to be alive. (5:5) Usually, denial is strongest in the surviving spouse. A common form of denial is leaving the deceased's room unchanged i.e., flight suits and boots in the closet and other flying memorabilia in place. Military documents such as aeronautical orders and officer commissions are commonly left in place. Denial is also, commonly, transferred to children as reluctance or refusal to admit the parent's death. Squadron members may deny acceptance in lesser

forms such as reluctance to remove the dead pilot's name from rosters, schedules, and flying equipment.

There is no schedule to rid one of denial and some forms may remain for months or years. Keeping a few treasures in view indefinitely as an affirmation of love should not be confused with denial. Examples include prominent display of a U.S. flag, pictures, memorials, and/or plaques.

In time, one will be able to face reality and accept death. This does not mean, however, that a part of you will not always grieve. That is natural.

Anger

When the stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by a feeling of anger, rage, envy, and resentment--"why me?" (7:50) Anger is a normal response and may surface in varying degrees depending on personalities and circumstances. Anyone or anything may be the subject of the anger.

It is fairly common for a widow or parent to focus blame on the Air Force after death from an aircraft accident. It is also common for a widow to be angry at her husband for "deserting" her, and if he neglected his health, the anger may be greater. (5:9) Even God gets a lot of blame with questions like "How could God let this happen?" Fellow aviators are often targets, not to exclude even you, the squadron commander.

It is important to understand that anger is a natural reaction and needs to be expressed. Whether it be by screaming, physical activity, or through talking, is unimportant. The

important thing is for it to be vented. Otherwise, it will build up, cause stress, and eventually surface in one way or another, often affecting job performance and other relationships. (5:9) Like other phases, anger may come and go. Professional help from the mental health clinic should be considered in the case of prolonged or destructive actions from rage. The chaplain may also provide help.

Guilt

Few survivors escape without some feeling of guilt. In the case of a sudden and accidental death, this guilt commonly surfaces through the torture of all kinds of "if only's". (5:10) If only we had not had that argument last evening. If only I had gotten up and had breakfast with him. If only I had not insisted that we do so-and-so. If only I had done some of those things I promised to do. If only I had covered that in the flight briefing. If only I had supervised closer.

Whatever the situation, we must realize that feelings of regret and guilt are normal, and we must meet them and dispose of them. If the day we would like to change could be undone, there would only be other situations equally as devastating. We must accept our fallibility. Professional counseling from a clergyman may help in this stage of grieving.

Depression

When the numbness wears off and rage has been exhausted, the survivor comes face-to-face with the seemingly hopeless reality of putting his or her life back together. The hopeless feeling that

pervades is depression. (5:11)

As if the loss of a husband is not enough, the military spouse must face multiple life changes. (6:576) She may be forced to pull up stakes and move without warning and without sponsorship on the other end. In addition, there may be changes in financial status, a change in schools for children, a change in social activities, and perhaps a change in line of work. In short, the families that lose a member in these conditions are exposed to an actuality that mandates a total change in their lives. The lethargy and despair that result are quite normal depression. It is a chore to just get out of bed and simple conversation can be exhausting.

Most people recover slowly but surely. A good friend can be invaluable by "just being there" to listen and comfort as the bereaved rambles and repeats concerning the loss. A friend can also aid in getting the spouse involved in activities that provide diversions for the body and mind. It is a long process in which the down times will surface over and over. They will, however, become shorter and less frequent. It may take years but healing will come. (5:11)

Acceptance

Acceptance is the final stage of facing death and may be very slow in coming. The initial stages of shock and denial pass fairly quickly while the stages of anger and guilt may linger. The stage of depression may last, at times, well past acceptance. Acceptance is not necessarily a happy state. It is just a facing

of reality and a signal that life must go on and it is time to "get on with it." It is a necessary and positive step in the whole process of facing death.

The personal impact from a serious loss is one that has rarely been translated into the day-to-day experiences an individual, or a family, might expect to encounter following such a loss. Because of the lack of familiarity regarding what to expect, our responses may be unnecessarily alarming to us. Many persons enduring loss and the process of grieving feel extra concern that their responses may be "not normal" and additional, unnecessary anxiety may result. The fact remains that there are no rigid timetables to direct the process, no specific order to what may be experienced, and no comprehensive list of possible reactions.

A first positive step in successfully accepting a sudden, unexpected loss is to be familiar with the classical stages of grieving discussed. A second step is to recognize that all people involved will have to experience the stages to some degree. This includes all members of a flying squadron and not just the family or families directly involved. The final step is to recognize the variance in grieving, allow each to grieve in their own way, and keep the group moving toward the future. The squadron commander is a vital player in all the steps that a flying unit must take to successfully accept death.

CHAPTER III

SQUADRON COMMANDER RESPONSIBILITIES

You, the squadron commander, are the key person when a death occurs in your squadron. There is plenty of qualified and willing help; however, you must orchestrate efforts of squadron members, military agencies, and civilian personnel alike to ensure an orderly and dignified solution to a difficult circumstance. Your responsibilities range from representing the wing commander, to interfacing with the surviving family, to scheduling funerals and memorial services, to seeing to the well being of your own family, and importantly, to keeping your squadron functioning and focused forward. The tasks are varied and require skills that you can only develop through study and preparation.

Notification of Next of Kin (NOK)

Notification of the next of kin may be the most difficult task associated with an accidental death, and the responsibility usually belongs to the squadron commander.

The command post becomes the action center for aircraft accidents. Details are gathered and the notification team assembles. The team usually consists of the squadron commander, chaplain, flight surgeon, and a female member. The female member should be an acquaintance of the surviving spouse and represent a stable and usually senior faction. Candidates are your wife or wives of the operations officer or flight commander. You will have an important input in selecting the female member.

Timing is critical in notifying the NOK. It is important that the notification be from officials of the Air Force rather than from acquaintances or the media. The death notification itself can be accomplished only after verification of the death has been made. (3:15) This can be a painstaking and time consuming process because it usually involves transportation of personnel to the crash site for identification of the remains. If the verification process is lengthy and notification of the NOK from outside sources is a risk, then an initial crash notification to the NOK is required immediately. This requires a follow-up death notification upon verification. One trip is desired; however, circumstances often dictate two.

Once the team arrives at the NOK residence, the notification should be straightforward, honest and compassionate. The tendency is to want to help, however, you should refrain from answering questions relating to the death, recovery of remains, benefits, etc. All these questions will be answered later by representatives from personal affairs and mortuary affairs. The notification team should be prepared for almost any kind of response and expect crying, screaming, and possibly even calm acceptance.

How can you help? Family and relatives must be given time to experience the initial stages of shock and denial. In the few hours immediately after notification, you cannot do much for the family except remain available and help with the mechanical things that must be done (food, telephone calls, follow-on notifications, etc.). Being a sensitive and good listener, and being

someone who can think clearly and unemotionally, will add a degree of calmness and stability to the situation.

Telling someone that he/she has lost a loved one is a tremendously difficult and gut-wrenching task. Yet, it must be done, and it is the squadron commander's responsibility. Know how you personally react to death. Are you able to think clearly? Have you thought about the female team member? Expect the classical reaction of shock. Have a plan to help the bereaved (food, children, etc.). A little preparation and thought beforehand can make the task easier and less painful for all concerned.

Educating the Squadron

Squadron personnel must be kept informed. Word travels fast and unofficial word has a way of sometimes travelling faster than the official word. You cannot keep a crash a secret. The wives of the squadron phone each other to see if anyone has "heard anything yet." After a crash, every wife whose husband is unaccounted for is a potential widow until she hears differently. (6:596) These anxious moments are an ongoing part of their lives, and obviously peaks when a crash occurs. The sooner that people can be told, the better.

Time must be allowed for grieving. Everyone is aware of the pain suffered by the family with the death, but what about the rest of the squadron? The fact is that every family in the squadron will have to suffer through a grieving process of their own to accept the loss, and the processes may differ dramatically. Some will be quiet while others will be angry and outspoken. Some

will seek companionship while others remain alone. Each individual will have to face facts in whatever way is most comfortable for him or her. It is very important that you understand and encourage grieving for it is part of the healing process. One way is to hold a squadron meeting and share your past experiences in similar situations. Don't be afraid to let your hurt and compassion show. Of particular concern are those folks who have not previously experienced death, and this can be up to half the squadron. The commander can provide invaluable leadership and consolation for these people just by showing concern and sharing experiences.

The key is to educate your squadron to the specifics of the accident and aggressively begin the healing process.

Coordination with Casualty Affairs

The Casualty Affairs Officer (CAO) is the Air Force professional in handling casualties--it is a job that he/she does well. (18:-) This individual is the expert on what the Air Force can and cannot do, what procedures to follow, and how to follow them. He is the source of invaluable information on benefits, financial support, legal questions, memorial and /or funeral services, and more. You should work very closely with the Casualty Affairs Officer because he is the expert.

The widow will naturally be more comfortable with you than with the Casualty Affairs Officer because she knows you. As a result of the familiarity, she will ask you many questions pertaining to the casualty affairs area of responsibility. The closer

the relationship between you and the CAO, the easier it will be to provide answers. A word of caution, you must insure that you not provide answers that are inconsistent with Air Force policies. Sometimes these opportunities arise just because the answers are "easier" to accept and appear to "help" or appease the widow. A good example is fly-by's. The widow may request a fly-by at both the memorial service and the burial. An easy answer is yes; however, only one is allowed. There are legal ramifications.

Coordination with the Chaplain

The chaplain is a professional, trained in dealing with grief. He/she is an integral part of facing death in a flying squadron and you should rely on these talents.

The chaplain has a realistic sense of what is happening as grieving persons experience different stages of the grieving process, and he/she has the skills to effectively help in grief situations. Providing spiritual comfort is most important because grieving people have a heightened sense of religious awareness, need, and response. (3:34) The chaplain has situational sensitivity and knows his/her limitations. He knows when he can be effective, knows when to be present, and knows when to be absent. This knowledge, insight, and training make the chaplain a most valuable asset and a person on which a wise squadron commander will depend. You cannot afford to ignore this professional.

The chaplain arranges funeral and memorial services. He works closely with the widow in order to acknowledge and incorporate her desires into ceremonies. He coordinates with civilian

clergy when desired or required. The chaplain is also very helpful to other members of the squadron needing his professional help. The chaplain can be a tremendous aid to the squadron commander in this difficult time. If the chaplain were an integral part of the squadron previously (frequent squadron visits, included in social events, active during temporary duty assignments), his effectiveness is even greater.

Appointing a Summary Court Officer (SCO)

The duty of a Summary Court Officer is to dispose of the personal property of a deceased Air Force Officer. (19:-) Since this may be one of the most sensitive duties an Air Force officer may ever be asked to perform, a squadron commander should select this person very carefully.

During the process of gathering and disposing of the deceased's personal property, the Summary Court Officer will need to be discreet, disciplined, and compassionate. Discretion will be required due to the personal nature of the job. There will be many aspects of the job that just should not be discussed, while other aspects should have very limited distribution. For example, should the deceased's personal property include articles (pictures, letters, etc.) that would be embarrassing for the widow, they should be removed. Discipline will be necessary to produce the proper legal documentation, and to work with unfamiliar agencies on base, particularly the staff judge advocate. Compassion may be the most demanding requirement for the SCO because he may be a close acquaintance of the widow and other family members.

Some familiarity with what to expect from the grieving process will help tremendously. Delivering personal property to a surviving family member is not easy because it is a direct reminder of the loss and may trigger another reaction of defense mechanisms such as crying, anger, and denial. It is an unpleasant task that must be done.

You, as the squadron commander, should consider all of these traits when selecting an officer. The person should be mature, organized, and understand the tasking implicitly. One additional consideration is family stability. The nature of the task will temporarily and naturally affect his home life, albeit temporarily, so it is imperative that he begin with a stable family. If the family is having a difficult time coping with the death, the additional strain from being an SCO may create more problems than benefits. Failing this criteria could be disastrous. Appointing a Summary Court Officer must be a carefully thought-out process.

Appointing an Escort Officer (EO)

The primary duty of an Escort Officer is to accompany the remains of a deceased military member to final destination. (20:-) This, too, may be one of the most sensitive duties an Air Force officer may ever be called on to perform. It is another selection requiring your most careful attention.

Requisites for escort duty include tact, sympathetic understanding and common sense. The escort represents the United States Air Force and must maintain sobriety and present an im-

maculate personal appearance. He or she will be under close scrutiny and must bring no discredit or embarrassment to the Air Force. These criteria make EO duty difficult in a benign environment. There are, however, additional challenges.

Air Force Regulation 143-1 (20:-) allows a special escort to be requested by the next of kin. In most cases, this is an officer that is a good friend of the deceased and his family. Familiarity with the NOK places more pressure on the Escort Officer because he is closer to the grief. Because of the closeness, he will probably spend more time with the family, and most likely attend most of the ceremonies. The additional time spent in the grieving environment results in greater stress on the individual and makes him more vulnerable to the pitfalls of the situation. The escort must understand his task and remain the ultimate role model. It is tremendously difficult duty.

You must be aware of the demands placed on the Escort Officer and select a stable, mature individual on whom you and the Air Force can depend. Family stability is even more important in this selection than in the case of the Summary Court Officer. First, the escort's wife will be affected not only by his selection, but because she knows, and in all probability is very close to the mishap family. Second, the situation will be exacerbated because the husband will normally be out of town for the funeral. You must be careful in this selection and be explicit in defining duties. You must emphasize the vulnerabilities associated with grief to include possible romantic involvement with the widow.

A wise choice is expected and gets no thanks. A poor choice could be very detrimental both individually and to the entire squadron.

Liaison with the Next of Kin (NOK)

The squadron commander should be the primary liaison between the Air Force and the next of kin and family. You are the logical link because you know the family and know what needs to be done. Other agencies from the base will, of course, be involved directly with the NOK; the chaplain will be active and organize funeral services, the Casualty Affairs Officer will explain benefits, the Mortuary Affairs Officer will arrange funeral services, and the Wing Commander will be involved rendering whatever assistance he can. The informal and natural link, however, remains you, the squadron commander.

Previous association through squadron social functions normally provides a comfortable basis for the NOK to communicate easily with the commander. She will normally be more comfortable asking you questions concerning benefits, memorial services, etc., than asking other representatives of the base. You become the formal focal point for official actions. Unofficially, but equally important, the commander, his wife, and other squadron members must assume responsibility for arranging schedules and providing food and accommodations for the NOK and family. The squadron commander should not hesitate to go beyond his squadron for assistance--there are many that would gladly help. You will spend a lot of time in liaison with the NOK in the few days fol-

lowing death.

A benefit from this liaison gives the commander an opportunity to control and coordinate events and keep actions headed in a logical direction and focused on the future. There are those who would unknowingly divert focus from the logical goal in an attempt to help. For example, "do-gooders" may suggest/offer additional, informal functions in an attempt to aid the widow without realizing the efforts to be detrimental. The functions may only prolong grief while providing few or no benefits. An involved commander will limit such efforts.

Keeping the Squadron Going Forward

The performance and readiness of the flying squadron is the primary job of the commander, even in the face of death from an accident. Although you are required to spend much time carrying out actions associated with the death, you must keep the squadron focused on the future. Complete the required actions for the funeral as quickly as possible and return to business as normal. The best way to achieve this objective is through the education of your squadron members.

Squadron members must be kept up-to-date with specifics of the accident and the memorial ceremonies. They should be told exactly what is going on and what is expected from them to include what will happen at the ceremonies and who is expected to attend. The families should be allowed sufficient time to grieve--each in its own way. Do not attempt to keep anything from squadron members.

Although you are obligated to dedicate much of your attention to the accident, you must remember the mission and look to the future. Post flying schedules and return as soon as possible to a normal schedule--hopefully you never changed. Emphasize the mission--to fly! This emphasis will lessen the pain and focus on the future. You must be very careful in balancing emphasis between death and business as usual. You must avoid a perception of coldness and lack of compassion in handling the death, and at the same time, you must insure readiness is maintained. It is a challenging tight rope to walk.

Your responsibilities as a flying squadron commander when an accident occurs in your squadron are immense and require considerable skill and knowledge. You become an orchestrator of a many-faceted effort that may be the most difficult and most important task of your Air Force career. Yet, there is little or no formal training to prepare you for this most difficult task. The preparation so vital to success must be self-initiated and self-taught.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

One of every two officers that become commanders of fighter squadrons will face a major aircraft accident during his command. The majority of these accidents will include death. The task of leading the squadron through this period may well be the most difficult and most important challenge of a commander's career. Unfortunately, there is very little guidance available to assist one through this difficult time.

Death is an emotional and somber topic that most would choose to ignore. It scares us to even think about death. Most of that fear comes from the unknown--not knowing what to do, not knowing what to expect. A squadron commander's best strategy for facing death is to remove the unknown by educating himself and his squadron members.

The first step is to know the classical stages of reaction in the grieving process. Familiarity with these reactions will school us in what to expect in reaction to death. The second step is to learn the specific responsibilities expected and know the expected sequence of events. Familiarity with these tasks and schedules will allow the commander to think through his decisions and develop a plan. Most of the elements of surprise can be eliminated and the major players can be selected through a rational and well thought out strategy. These commander's actions will add stability and order. Just educating the commander is not

enough. The entire subject of accidental death should be shared with members of the squadron and their families. The optimum, of course, would be to complete this educational process prior to facing a difficult situation.

If the commander can educate himself and his squadron members to remove the unknown associated with facing death, they will be able to walk through it much easier. Learning what to expect is not that difficult a task, but requires a little effort, imagination, and planning. The rewards will be well worth the effort, for if the squadron must face death, they will emerge stronger because they were prepared. If no-one dies, the effort is not wasted. Death, eventually, will touch all of us.

CHAPTER V

SUGGESTIONS

There are infinite ways to approach educating yourself and your people concerning death. As with any topic, individuals react differently. You must begin by selecting a process that is comfortable for both you and your people.

How to Learn about Your People

The key to leading any organization is knowing your people. The better you know your people, the more successful you will be at both predicting and directing their actions. A fighter squadron is small enough to allow the commander to know everyone in the squadron fairly well. A good technique is to "chat" with them individually. A little preparation prior to the chat should include a records check to learn specific details unique to each individual. Details such as home town, schools, religion, and previous jobs can be interjected into the interview to demonstrate your concern and interest in the person. It will be obvious that you have taken time to dig out the specifics. Once the individual recognizes that you are interested in him or her, he/she will become more open with you. You will be a better commander from knowing your people better.

You should use every opportunity to learn more about your people to keep abreast of their concerns and problems. It is a continuing process that will pay large dividends throughout your tour as commander. Preparation to face death is just one part of

the process.

CHECKLIST

1. Review personnel records
2. Conduct individual interviews
3. Capture unique characteristics of each individual/family
4. Develop a file for each individual/family
5. Update file every six months

How to Learn Classical Reactions

Knowing the classical reactions to death will help remove much of the unknown associated with facing death. Reading is an excellent way to learn, and there is plenty of material available. Begin with the books by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. (7:--) Also, use the professionals available in the clergy and in mental health. These people are professionally trained to face death and will help. They will have sufficient literature to provide condensed versions of the topics you need to study. The combination of knowing your people and knowing typical, expected reactions builds a very solid foundation on which you can lead the squadron through a death.

CHECKLIST

1. Establish a reading program
2. Visit with chaplain
3. Visit with mental health
4. Develop an abbreviated handout for squadron members

How to Learn the Procedures

The Air Force has regulations and procedures to cover any contingency, and death is no exception. The education process includes becoming familiar with these procedures.

Every concerned agency has a checklist and regulation to follow when there is an aircraft accident. The best way to learn these procedures is to visit the responsible individuals, review their checklists and regulations, and ask questions. Primary players include the command post, personal affairs, mortuary affairs, staff judge advocate, and the chaplain. Most of the procedures overlap but naturally emphasize the agency's specific area of expertise or responsibility.

Once these procedures are reviewed and become familiar to you, you may want to keep a file of the more pertinent information. You may even want to develop a checklist of your own.

CHECKLIST

1. Review regulations
 - AFP 211-15, Benefits
 - AFR 30-25, Casualty Affairs
 - AFR 143-6, Personal Property
 - AFR 143-1, Mortuary Affairs
2. Visit command post and review checklist
3. Visit chaplain and review checklist
4. Visit Casualty Affairs and review checklist
5. Visit Mortuary Affairs and review checklist
6. Visit Staff Judge Advocate and review checklist

7. Develop your Squadron Commander checklist
8. Prepare an abbreviated handout for squadron members

How to Educate your People

It is not enough for just the squadron commander to be prepared to face death. You must share this information with your squadron members. This can be a ticklish task, however, because pilots typically deny the prospects of death, and prefer not to discuss the topic. Getting them interested requires a great deal of tact.

You, the squadron commander, are once again the focal point. You can start with short sessions during squadron meetings to cover procedures for accidents. What is the notification process? Why do you not make personal telephone calls? You can introduce the subject of benefits by asking about the status of wills. You may want to follow-up with appointments with the staff judge advocate for those that don't have wills. Once the ice is broken you can hold specific sessions to cover procedures. You may want to invite the chaplain and/or the Personal Affairs Officer to present a short briefing to the group. It is beneficial to invite the wives and include a picnic or cookout. Functions at the club are also appropriate and may be combined with Happy Hour. The key is to provide pertinent information in an atmosphere comfortable to all. Any technique that works is worth the effort.

There are some pitfalls. The squadron commander should keep close control of the agenda. Should your people lose interest or

feel forced, the results may not be favorable. Make sure the information is presented in an interesting manner. If someone speaks, review the "script" and make sure it is in fighter pilot language. Keep it short and simple, and show genuine concern. Using personal experiences to set the stage is excellent. Remember, about half your squadron will be addressing the topic for the first time. If your people learn, the effort will be worthwhile. If your people don't learn, it will be a waste of time.

CHECKLIST

1. Distribute handout on classical reactions to death
2. Distribute handout on accidental death procedures
3. Conduct squadron meetings with spouses
 - Casualty Affairs presentation
 - Mortuary Affairs presentation
 - Chaplain presentation
4. Update annually

How to Keep it Moving

You are the leader of your squadron. You must set the stage to educate both yourself and your squadron members by developing and following a plan. You must focus on the future no matter what the divisions are. Take time in working through death, but don't lose focus. You absolutely must keep the big picture as you work through a death situation. It will only work if you, the commander, are prepared and will lead!

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